



REACTION CONTROL

Developing the Antifragile Warrior

THE ANTIFRAGILE WARRIOR

“War is for participants a test of character; it makes bad men worse and good men better,” wrote Joshua Chamberlain, Colonel of the 20th Maine infantry regiment and later Medal of Honor recipient. To say it another way, the stress of combat reinforces the warrior’s virtues. More than a century later, Nassim Taleb, a scholar and author on decision making, risk, and probability, convincingly argues that what man should seek is not resilience or robustness but instead a property Mr. Taleb calls *antifragility*. Where the property of fragility describes things that break when submitted to relatively low or sudden stress, and the property of resilience or robustness describes those things that tolerate stress without changing, *antifragility* instead describes those things that actually gain strength as a result of stress. Fusing Chamberlain’s and Taleb’s assertions, the antifragile warrior is one who gains strength through conflict. This begs the question: What is needed for a warrior to become antifragile?

Likely the most recognizable example of antifragility is human biology. Expose a human to biological stress such as a vaccine (a dead or weakened germ) and the body develops antibodies to protect it against future exposure—this is called immunization. In other words, immunization is a deliberate process to increase resistance and tolerance to infections (biological stress). Expose a human to physical stress such as weightlifting and the body develops muscle strength and endurance—this is called exercise or physical training. Like immunization, exercise is a deliberate process to increase strength and tolerance to physical stressors. But, what about mental stress? What is the process to gain mental strength, strength to make good decisions in bad conditions (under stress)? Answer: *Reaction Control*. *Reaction Control* is a self-regulating process to improve mental fitness for combat: frustration tolerance, decision making, and control of one’s behavior in spite of mental stress.

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– Joshua Chamberlain, Colonel of the 20th Maine Infantry Regiment, 1863

OVERVIEW:

1. Introduction to Reaction Control – What Is It?
2. Mental Fitness — Some History
3. How the Human Mind Makes Decisions
4. Impediments to Rational Decisions:
 - a. Emotions caused by irrational thoughts (fallacies)
 - b. Useless judgment
 - c. Instincts
5. The Reaction Control Process
6. Conclusion and Further Study

Introduction to Reaction Control – What Is It? Reaction Control is self-regulation to increase mental fitness for combat. Just as physical fitness training (PT) is a process to increase physical fitness for combat and PT is a daily habit for Marines to continuously improve, so is Reaction Control for the mind. The focus of Reaction Control is on discipline of your mind, your thoughts, and ultimately your decision making and behavior. A warrior needs both mind and body to defeat the enemy, so a Marine's combat fitness is really the sum of his/her physical fitness and mental fitness. And, just like physical fitness, if the mind is not fit for duty then the risk of injury increases significantly. Succinctly, PT is for your body, Reaction Control is for your mind.

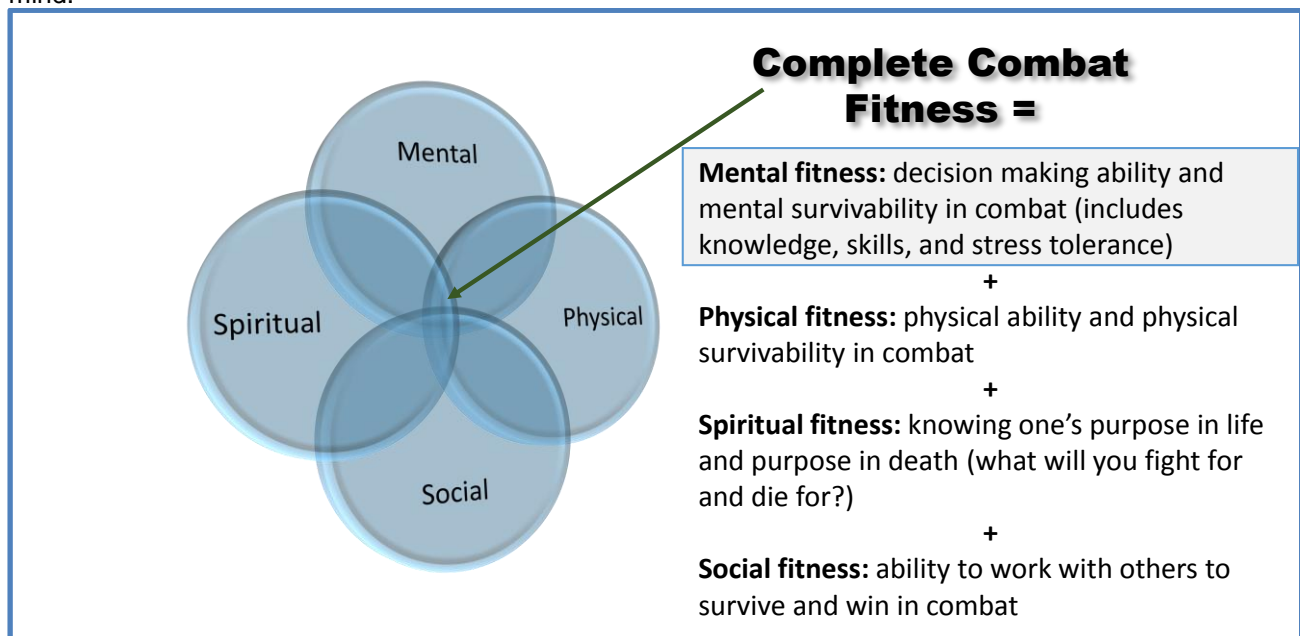


Figure 1

Mental Fitness – Some History. Mental fitness is not a new concept. Roman soldiers practiced the philosophy of stoicism to prepare themselves for the rigors of war. Chinese Warrior Monks practiced Zen Buddhism. The Samurai Knights melded values from Shinto, Confucianism, Taoism, and Zen Buddhism to develop their Bushido Code (the way of the warrior). Native Americans of 18th and 19th centuries had countless warrior codes unique to their respective tribes. The Vikings had Norse mythology, and the Greeks had their own mythology of gods and beasts. Why? Why do warriors need these beliefs, these codes? Answer: to discipline their mind for the rigors of combat, to control their behavior in spite of their emotions (for example, fear, sorrow, elation, and regret). Reaction Control does this for the modern Marine. Similar to Bushido, Reaction Control is an amalgamation of stoicism, pragmatism, rational emotive behavioral therapy (REBT) philosophy, and contemporary neuroscience.



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How the Human Mind Makes Decisions. The first step is understanding how the mind works, and what things influence human decision making. Consider Figure 2 below. An event occurs. This event can be the crack of a bullet narrowly missing your body or witnessing an automobile accident. The event includes your environment. You observe this given event, a moment in time, using your biological senses. Your information is finite. Up to this point you control nothing. Yet, after this observation, personal perception occurs. This is your reality, how you perceive an event at a given moment in time and space with finite information. The stimuli associated with the event cause emotions and thoughts based on your memory (experience) and beliefs. Sometimes emotions occur first, which then trigger thoughts. Other times thoughts occur first, which then trigger emotions. Indeed, a key insight from modern neuroscience is that "reasoning is actually suffused with emotion."¹ Thinking is the process of selecting information from stimuli, organizing it, and interpreting it. Additionally, the mind is processing this information (thinking) in two fashions: intuitively and deliberately. These two processes are often labeled as *system 1 thinking* (fast, intuitive, implicit, automatic, effortless) and *system 2 thinking* (slow, complex, explicit, deliberate). All this thinking leads to a decision and subsequent action or inaction—in other words, behavior. Behavior, interacting with the environment, causes consequences (good, bad, or indifferent). Finally, observed consequences provide a feedback to our decision process giving us the ability to adapt (a.k.a. experience). In total, the human decision making process is a quasi-linear string of event, perception, emotions and thoughts intertwined, behavior, consequence, and feedback.

How You Make Decisions

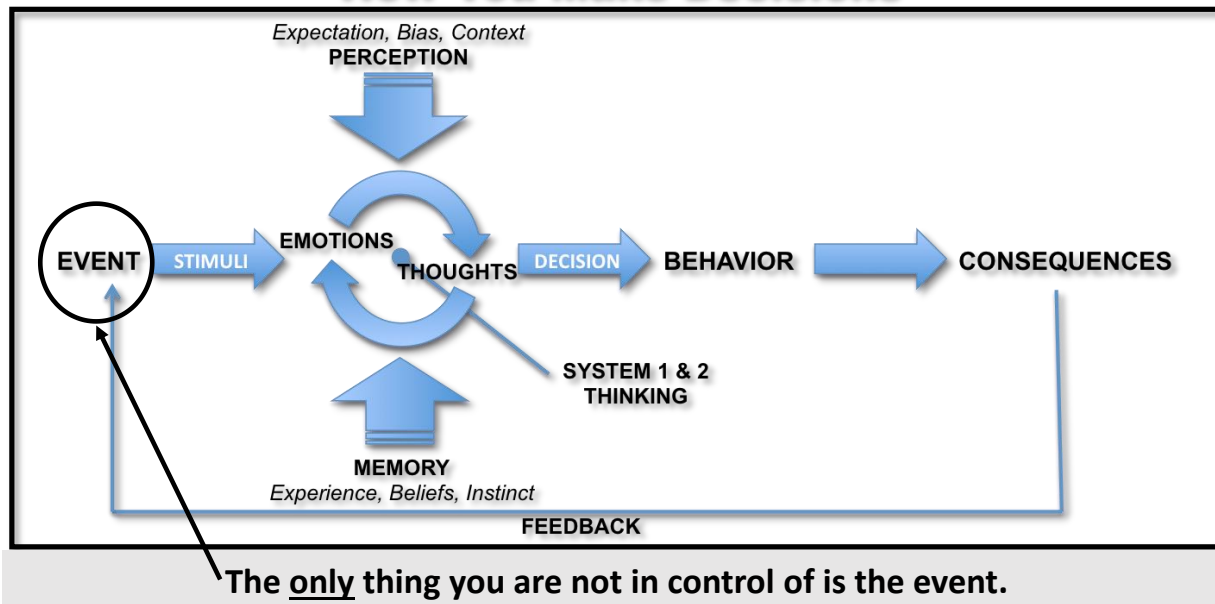


Figure 2

Impediments to Rational Decisions. Often the problem is emotions, specifically debilitating or unhealthy emotions. Those emotions are almost always caused by (1) fallacies (our underlying irrational beliefs), (2) useless judgment* (when one judges something but it doesn't contribute to his/her decision making), or (3) instincts (auto-physiological responses to changes in his/her environment).

"Emotion, which is suffering, ceases to be suffering as soon as we form a clear and precise picture of it."

– Baruch Spinoza, 17th-century Dutch philosopher

*The term *useless judgment* is the author's, NJK's, own concept and term, not yet formally recognized by a profession/discipline.

¹ Chris Mooney, "Made-up Minds," The Week, May 20, 2011, 48-49.



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“Expectation is the root of all heartache.”

– William Shakespeare, late 16th-century English poet

“The greatest obstacle to living is expectancy, which hangs upon tomorrow and loses today.”

– Seneca, Roman Stoic philosopher

“Comparison is the thief of joy.”

– Theodore Roosevelt, 26th President of the United States

- (1) **Emotions caused by irrational thoughts (fallacies).** Fallacies are irrational beliefs, irrational beliefs about yourself, your environment, or other people. Many people are completely unaware of their fallacies and how those fallacies frame their view of what should be and what should not be (a.k.a. expectations). Figure 3 is a very short list of some of the most common fallacies (there are many more than listed here). Learning about fallacies is fundamental to Reaction Control because Reaction Control is a process that helps one identify their fallacy and dispute it in order to have a more rational view of life.

Fallacy of ...	Description
Approval	Belief that it is vital to get the approval of virtually every person
<i>Example:</i>	<i>feeling nervous because people you really don't like seem to disapprove of you</i>
Catastrophic Expectations	Belief if something bad can happen, it will
<i>Example:</i>	<i>"If I share my idea, they'll probably laugh at me."</i>
Causation	Belief that emotions are caused by others
<i>Example:</i>	<i>"You made me feel horrible."</i>
Helplessness	Belief that satisfaction in life is determined by forces beyond your control
<i>Example:</i>	<i>"I can't get promoted; my boss is always working against me."</i>
Overgeneralization	Belief based on limited evidence or exaggerated shortcomings
<i>Example:</i>	<i>"You never listen to me," or "I'm so stupid; I always forget my keys."</i>
Perfection	Belief that one should handle every situation with complete confidence and skill
<i>Example:</i>	<i>assuming people won't appreciate you if you are imperfect</i>
Shoulds	Inability to distinguish between what <u>is</u> and what <u>should be</u>
<i>Example:</i>	<i>"There should be no traffic when I am driving."</i>

Figure 3

“A great many people think they are thinking when they are merely rearranging their prejudices.”

– William James, late 19th-century American philosopher of Pragmatism

- (2) **Useless judgment.** Useless judgment is useless. An example of useless judgment is when a person says something like, "I don't like how he drives," but has no intention of using that judgment to make a decision. Said another way, useless judgment is making an assessment (or labeling) of something or someone but that assessment has no relevance whatsoever on the observer's goals. Another example is someone becoming upset because s/he doesn't like the weather but still must work in the rain (the judgment is useless because it changes nothing). Useless judgment leads to useless emotion and useless stress. To use a cliché: *Don't hate the player or the game because neither is going to change just because you don't like it* (all you did is increase your stress without any benefit). Another example of useless judgment is prejudice, the act of *pre-judging* someone. Though some people use this type of useless judgment to actually make decisions, those decisions by default are irrational, illogical, and/or not valid.

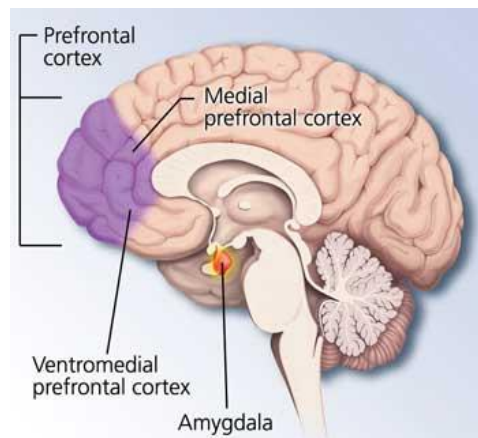
“If you stay rational yourself, the stupidity of the world helps you.”

– Charles T. Munger, Vice Chairman of Berkshire Hathaway



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- (3) **Instincts.** Conquer your instincts. An example of an instinct is suddenly seeing a stick that looks like a snake and instinctively jumping back feeling scared and stressed. That instinct is an auto-physiological response—in this case, a flight-or-fight response—which is when visual cues reach the amygdala (the emotional control center of the brain) before the prefrontal cortex (the planning and reasoning center) gets a chance to deliberately think (a.k.a. system 2 thinking) about what it just saw (see Figure 4). These responses are powerful and seemingly immediate because humans have more neural connections running from the amygdala to the prefrontal cortex than going in the other direction (it is also an old survival mechanism developed when Homo sapiens first walked the earth). A person cannot prevent these responses in total, but with practice s/he can gain more control over his/her reactive behavior by using Reaction Control over a long period of time (months or years) to actually change the "wiring" of their brain (this is called neuroplasticity).



Brain Structures Involved in Dealing with Fear and Stress

Figure 4

“Nothing gives one person so much of an advantage over another as to remain unruffled in all circumstances.”

– Thomas Jefferson, 3rd President of the United States

The Reaction Control Process. So now that we understand how the brain makes decisions, and we know about fallacies, instincts, and useless judgment, what exactly is Reaction Control? And, how does someone use it? As said before, Reaction Control is a self-regulating process that someone can use to improve their mental health, their mental combat fitness, by identifying, disputing, and ultimately replacing their underlying irrational beliefs with rational beliefs. That process looks like this:

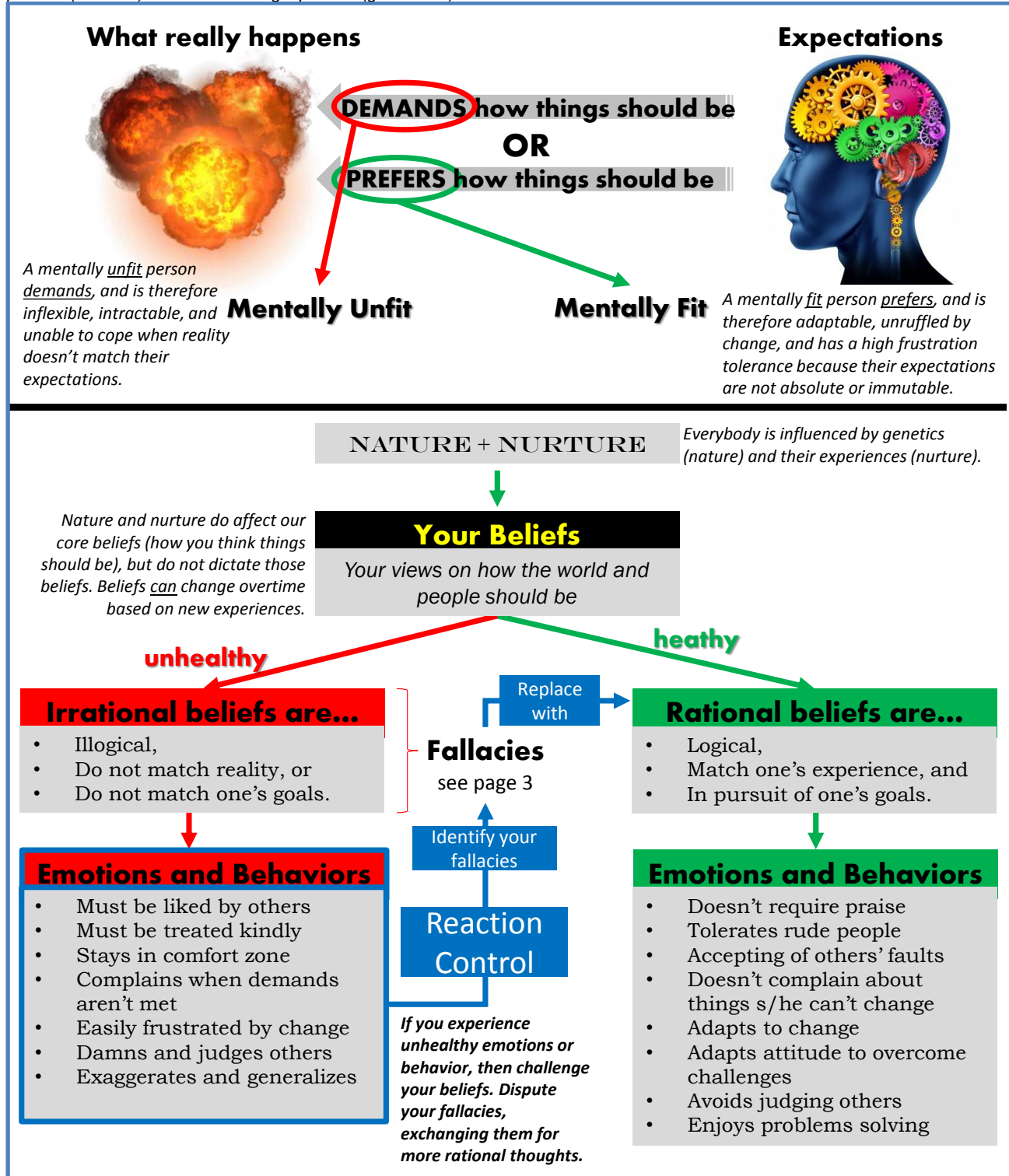
1. Monitor your emotions, and identify those emotions.
 - What is the emotion?
2. Recall the activating event.
 - What happened?
3. Identify the belief or thought linking the event to the emotion.
 - What is the fallacy?
4. Dispute the fallacy, and replace it with a rational belief.
 - What is rational?

Figure 5. First and foremost, the person must truly accept the fact that s/he can control their emotions and thoughts. No matter how deeply engrained beliefs are, the person can still change them.



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Figure 6 (below) is a graphical depiction of the Reaction Control process (blue lines) and how it changes a person's irrational thought process (red lines) to a rational thought process (green lines).



Simply disputing your fallacy doesn't always change your emotion that instant (not at first at least). Like PT, it requires consistency over a long period of time before mental fitness improves. But, make no mistake, Reaction Control *will* improve your decision making ability, increase your frustration tolerance, and discipline your thoughts and behavior for the rigors of combat.



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Conclusion. The very essence of Reaction Control is better thinking, better decision making. It only **begins** with examining emotions and what causes them, and making good decisions in spite of them. Yet, in the end Reaction Control is more than that. Anything that degrades one's decision making ability is the target of Reaction Control: reducing bias, improving logic, careful use of heuristics, learning new mental models, etc., are all pathways to improve decision making. Therefore, **Reaction Control is a lifelong quest to perpetually improve your decision making in order to survive and win no matter the conditions.** This quest, Reaction Control, is a daily habit to examine and critique one's judgments, to learn new mental models and challenge old, and ultimately change ourselves in order to be better decision makers.

Further Study. An essential component of Reaction Control is self-study, reflection, and synthesis of new and old ideas. Mastering Reaction Control is a very personal and lifelong endeavor. By reading, discussing, and learning from the suggested books and essays below, one will develop their own personal style of Reaction Control, tailored specifically to their own proclivities, idiosyncrasies, and life goals.

-----On Warrior Ethos (History) -----

The Code of the Warrior: Exploring Warrior Values Past and Present by Shannon E. French

-----On Stoicism and Pragmatism (Philosophy) -----

Courage under Fire by James Stockdale

<http://media.hoover.org/sites/default/files/documents/StockdaleCourage.pdf>

Stockdale on Stoicism I: The Stoic Warrior's Triad

https://www.usna.edu/Ethics/_files/documents/stoicism1.pdf

Stockdale on Stoicism II: Master of my Fate

https://www.usna.edu/Ethics/_files/documents/Stoicism2.pdf

The Enchiridion by Epictetus

Meditations by Marcus Aurelius

Letters from a Stoic by Seneca

Pragmatism by William James

A Guide to the Good Life: The Ancient Art of Stoic Joy by William B. Irvine

Plato at the Googleplex: Why Philosophy Won't Go Away by Rebecca Goldstein

-----On Decision Making (Science) -----

Fundamentals of Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy, Handbook by Windy Dryden and Rhena Branch

Logically Fallacious: The Ultimate Collection of Over 300 Logical Fallacies by Bo Bennett

Thinking, Fast and Slow by Daniel Kahneman

Seeking Wisdom: From Darwin to Munger by Peter Bevelin

Sources of Power: How People Make Decisions by Gary A. Klein

Antifragile: Things That Gain from Disorder by Nassim Nicholas Taleb